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OPINION | An Unequal Equation? CPEC Development and Pakistan's Political Mindset

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By Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf



China's growing activities in Pakistan are coming increasingly into prominence of strategic analysts and have been worrying the international community since the last few years. Having maintained a rather 'behind-the-scenes' support for Islamabad for decades, Beijing, today is exercising its influence more publicly. Besides Chinese concerns about the security of its investments and development activities, it seems obvious that the identified strategic and economic benefits of cooperation with Pakistan are outbidding the risk perceptions. Latter phenomenon finds its most visible expression in the launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. But since the start of the CPEC planning and related first engagements in infrastructure and energy sectors, Pakistan witnesses' severe debates, critics and protests with crucial impacts on domestic political dynamics.

However, one can argue that all these CPEC based, new and far-reaching social, economic trajectories and determinants for decision making in Pakistan will not bring out a fundamental change in the reactionary die-hard, security-dominated mindset of the country's leadership featured by repressive domestic politics and state-sponsorship of cross-border terrorism. This will have serious consequences for the CPEC project in the long-run, especially since domestic security, stability, and national harmony, as well as constructive relations and cooperation with Pakistan's neighbors, are essential pre-conditions for ongoing Chinese support for this mega infrastructure project. Against this backdrop, one can further state that due to the partisan economic interests of the central government, and the civilian and military establishment, as well as the extraordinary active role of Pakistan Army in implementing the CPEC, the project will be realized at all costs. Latter one includes not only finances, natural resources but also social and political costs. In this context, the mechanism of the CPEC development is further strengthening the dominant role of the military at the expense of civilian decision-making power and democratic rule. Later issues are without a

doubt creating an atmosphere in which the above-mentioned traditional conservative mindset of Pakistan's elites can further flourish and determine contemporary and future course of the country. Consequently, it appears that there is a concrete threat that this backward orientated narrow-minded thinking in Pakistan's decision-making process will make the necessity to fulfill the pre-conditions for a successful implementation of CPEC more difficult and costly, and will harm the smooth functioning of the economic corridor in the long run.

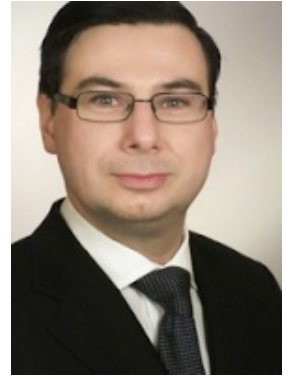
The above-described scenario is not really unexpected but still surprising and unfortunate. Because if one looks at the proclamations and formulated goals in the context of the CPEC development, it looks quite promising that there is finally the political will among Pakistan's decision makers to deal comprehensively and sustainably with domestic terrorism and militancy. In other words, the announced massive Chinese investments in Pakistan linked with the pre-conditions of ending political rivalries between the provinces and respective major political parties as well as to ensure a secure and stable environment for Chinese development project should obviously function as a catalyst in the mindset of the national establishment to address the Chinese demands.

In qualitative terms (meaning a concrete drop-down of a number of terror attacks) it seems that the counter-terrorism efforts by the combined forces of regular military, paramilitary and intelligence were successfully in many parts of the country, especially in Karachi and in the FATA. However, the ongoing attacks, less in numbers but still on a high level with maximum damage shows that the terrorists are still able to challenge the state wherever and whenever they want. As such, Islamabad is until now not in the position to prove Beijing that Pakistan will be 'terror free' in the near future and is able to provide the necessary security for Chinese investment in a short and middle-term perspective. In this context, one should also mention that several international terror groups, foremost Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda 'declared Jihad' against the People's Republic to the claimed anti-Muslim policy of Beijing in the western province of Xinjiang, might identify the CPEC and related projects as targets for terrorist activities. Besides this international threat factor, there are also severe domestic issues which could lead to further violence and political conflicts in Pakistan in the context of China-Pakistan cooperation in general and CPEC development in particular. Especially the non-transparent and secretive way the CPEC project got started and decisions were made regarding the first projects ('Early Harvest Projects'). The fact that most of the first wave of CPEC related energy and urban infrastructure projects (f. ex. Orange Line of Lahore Metro) will be realized in Punjab or Sindh created much anger among the traditionally disadvantaged provinces of KPK and Balochistan and the Federal Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). These provinces are feeling excluded and deprived of the potential benefits of the CPEC. In Balochistan, where the Gwadar port as the central piece of the CPEC is located, remarkable resistance among the local people emerged, identifying Chinese development projects as exploitation and occupation of their homeland. Armed resistance and subsequent measures of violent repression and truncation of all kind of fundamental rights of the Baloch people through the military and intelligence of the central government are rather the norms than the exception.

Subsequently, instead of calming, the CPEC implementation is rather worsening the situation. Some of the reasons are the subsequent distinction of people, expropriation of land and property, restrictions on the movement of people when the SEZ in Gwadar, and environmental destructions. Latter side-effects of the CPEC are further entrenching the conflict between the people of Balochistan province and the central government in Islamabad. In order to undermine the rising critical voices against the current CPEC framework, the authorities are reacting within traditional patterns of enforcing major development projects: violations of fundamental, human rights in general and the restriction of freedom of expression and association in particular. In result, the CPEC project is creating more conflict in Pakistan than contributing to stability. Being wedged by a rigid mindset, there is also no indication that this trajectory will change in future.

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Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf, is Senior Researcher (member) at the South Asia Institute (SAI), Heidelberg University, and Director of Research at SADF (Coordinator : Democracy Research Program). He was educated at the SAI and Institute of Political Science (IPW) in Heidelberg. Additionally, he is a visiting fellow at the National University of Science and Technology (NUST, Islamabad), affiliated researcher at the Pakistan Security Research Unit (PSRU, Durham University), and a former research fellow at IPW and Centre de Sciences Humaines (New Delhi, India).



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